

A Lesson from the Apaches

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"So you are an Apache fan," he said, soon after my Norwegian friends had left.

Surprised, I turned around and saw him taking a swig of beer and looking at me with some interest.

"Well, I don't know what you mean," I blurted out, irritated by being called an Apache fan by a stranger. "Sure, I like to read about traditional Apache culture before we destroyed it for ever. But it's not that I have any romantic ideas about Indians, you know. I study the Apache, particularly Chiricahua Apache, because I can learn something for myself, not because I want to be an Apache fan."

"Ok, Ok," he said. "I just heard you talk about Victorio to those guys, and I thought I'd ask. I am also interested in Chiricahua Apaches."

I am sitting in a pub in downtown Oslo. A few minutes ago, my Norwegian buddies Tom and Even, with whom I had held a "powwow" on the Chiricahua Apache, left and I decided to linger on for a while. I am drinking a 47-kroner-a-glass Norwegian brew (that's over \$6) and wondering about my Fulbright "gig," as one of my American colleagues has called it. The pub is filled with cigarette smoke and an assortment of Norwegian and international clientele. I am looking at nothing in particular, but I can see a huge Color Line ocean liner pulling into the Oslo harbor, the screaming seagulls, the perennial waves, the slender legs and firm breasts of a passing Norwegian waitress. Slender legs and firm breasts always make me feel melancholy. Love's labors lost, I suppose. Another opportunity to be gone forever.

"My name is Roger," he said, "and yours?"

I gave him my name, and then he surprised me again. He said he had read a few issues of *The American Rationalist* in the library of Human-Etisk Forbund, the Norwegian Humanist organization, located at *St. Olavs Gate* in Oslo.

"In fact, I know quite a bit about you," he said.

It is impossible to say anything sensible in a situation like this because it is not clear whether you are being complimented or not. So after I looked closer at his over-fifty face and made some customary verbal noise like "Really?" I asked him what he was up to.

"You don't want to know too much, but we can talk a little."

He reminded me of a character out of a recent movie about Geronimo: a tall, rawboned Texan killer of Yaqui Indians whose scalps he would sell as Apache scalps to the Sonoran Government in Mexico for maybe 100 pesos apiece. He had cold, steel-blue eyes and thin lips, to which was attached now a joyless smile. Our conversation inevitably turned to NATO's horrific destruction of Yugoslavia, topic number one in Norway at the time.

"You see, unlike you, I can say what I want about the so-called humanitarian war in Kosovo. Nobody can touch me, not the Pentagon, not the State Department, certainly not the Norwegian government, which as you know is one of the most humanitarian and liberal governments in the world.

"I know what we Americans did in Vietnam. I was lucky to escape from that hell. Got some compensation for the physical and mental mess-up I was in and left the States. Not for me, 'the greatest country in the world'! No, Sir! In Vietnam I saw the heart of darkness, and it was not the Viet Cong that scared the hell out of me. It was people from the White House, the Pentagon, and the CIA. The hawks, the war pigs. I was not afraid of the Vietnamese commies, I was afraid of the Americans."

As I sit now, trying to recall the way Roger spoke, I wish I had had a tape recorder. Well, of course, Roger, or whoever he is, may not have agreed to talk then, but now, a couple of months after we met, I find I am already forgetting some of the things he had to say about the American military machine.

"The real war in Vietnam was a civil war," Roger picked up. "It was a war based on local hatreds which we, Americans, could never understand, let alone control. It takes a really uninformed and arrogant Amer-

ican Christian politician to believe that the offensive by the Communist Viet Cong to abolish the corrupt CIA-installed South Vietnamese government posed a threat to our national interests. We should have left the Vietnamese to fight it out alone. If we really wanted to help the Vietnamese, we should have intervened when they were fighting for their independence against the French. But we, a freedom-loving people, ignored the Vietnamese and helped the French. I don't know of a worse example of hypocrisy in international politics.

"The American intervention in Vietnam after the French were kicked out was a war invented by the Pentagon hawks and their cronies in the CIA and the State Department, that paranoid Christer, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, in particular.

"And now we have invented another war: in Serbia. No American can ever hope to understand the Serbs' love of Kosovo, the land of their ancestors. Serbian history stretches over a millennium, American barely 200 years. If you tell me that Kosovo was the heartland of the Serbian nation in, say, 1389 when they lost it to the invading Muslim hordes, then I, as an American, have no idea of what you are talking about, because 1389 was still 400 years before we were born as a nation. The small-scale civil war that was taking place there before USA-led NATO intervened was an ugly ethnic conflict, but other than intelligent diplomatic pressure there was nothing that could be done not to aggravate the problem."

He smiled his cold easy smile and ordered another beer. The firm breasts and slender legs came again. And again I felt sad, and my heart sank.

"Our great country," said Roger, "has bombed twenty sovereign countries since we fried hundreds of thousands of innocent Japanese civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. During the short time we have existed as a nation, we have conducted over 400 military interventions and over 6,000 covert interventions into about 100 countries, and we have killed millions of non-military people. Just recently we bombed three countries other than Yugoslavia: Sudan, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the last of which we continue to bomb at will. Or ad nauseam, should I say. We just can't stop bombing not to kill. We Americans are fascinated by war, and we can't live without enemies, real or imagined."

"I don't know." I said, "I don't know why you make us out to be so different. The Germans and the Japanese, for example, are as warlike as we are. Perhaps all nations are."

"Perhaps, but not to the same extent," Roger said. "And the Germans and the Japanese have learned to live very well without enemies and without war-driven economies. We haven't."

Roger is not the first Vietnam vet I have run into in my life. At a university where I taught in New Mexico I met another one. About fifteen years after his military stint in the Vietnamese jungle, he was trying to reroute his life from a blind alley, but it seemed that the mental cancer fed on the wartime memories kept him confused and disoriented. Much of the money he got from the Feds he had spent on a fancy car and brand new tennis equipment. He thought that going back to school and playing tennis would keep his nightmares at bay.

But Roger was tougher. Maybe as tough as the legendary Cochise. Or Nana, who conducted the most savage guerrilla raids against the Mexican and American armies in the 1880's, even though he was so crippled by arthritis that he could scarcely walk. But when mounted, Nana was indestructible and devastating: he and his Chiricahua buddies, not more than twenty, raided, pillaged, and killed dozens of their enemies with a ferocity, cunning, and courage unmatched in the annals of guerrilla warfare.

And Roger was well read and articulate. And he could switch effortlessly from easy Yankee banter to formal academic talk.

"You must have heard what Madame Notverybright once said?" Roger suddenly asked.

(Roger, like many American and British Norwegians who regularly read British newspapers, was referring to British journalist Andrew Stephen's celebrated description in *New Statesman* of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright as "Notverybright.")

"Well, I've read that she is not very bright, but I don't know what you mean," I answered.

"I am hard pressed," said Roger, "to think of a woman more morally repulsive than Madame Albright. Some time ago, I was watching a rerun of *60 Minutes* on how US-imposed sanctions on Iraq were causing thousands of Iraqi children to die from malnutrition and diseases. You should remember that contrary to what Americans think, few Iraqis would trade places with Americans. There was hardly any malnutrition in Iraq before the Gulf War, and food was plentiful and inexpensive. In fact, although the Iraqi government curbed political rights, the Iraqis enjoyed a high

standard of living. They boasted a very good health and educational system, probably better than ours. But since 1991, thanks to the White House and the Pentagon, an average of 5000 Iraqi children under 5 have been dying monthly as a result of malnutrition and starvation caused by economic sanctions and constant bombing.

"Well, anyhow, at one point this Madeleine Notsobright appears on the show. She looks like a Russian or Serbian babushka, misshapen and rustic, and it would be impossible to pick her out in a crowd of refugees from Kosovo. Anyhow, she is asked to comment on the morality of these sanctions, and says, I remember, something like this: 'This is a very hard choice. But the price we think is worth it.'"

I could sense Roger became so intense that I was afraid he would explode and maybe lift hair or something. If he orders another beer, I must get out of here. For now, though, I kept a diplomatic quiet and continued to work on my own brew.

"Mind you: this is a woman tallung, an American lady. So much for the idea that women, old babushkas in particular, have an instinctive respect for life – unlike many men, naturally violent and homicidal. You know, a British punk in Soho or a Hispanic thug in downtown LA has a more developed moral sense than Madame Notsobright does. A punk or a thug – and I have seen a few in action – can torture and kill, but these guys do follow a code of sorts. Inmates follow a code too. A punk or a thug or an inmate imposes a limit on the extent of the evil things he will do. For instance, he will not screw his close friends and he will leave infants alone. Plus there is only so much evil ordinary criminals, even serial killers, can do.

"But Madame Notsobright, Clinton, Clark and the other American boys and gals who have orchestrated this and other bombing campaigns don't know their limits because they don't see their victims. They can send thousands of Iraqi infants and children to their graves over a half-baked political program and then talk about the political price, smile, and say that the deaths are worth "it." Or they can vaporize a thousand innocent Serbian and Kosovar citizens and call it "collateral damage" and move on to the next item on the agenda. And they could send half a million Americans to the Vietnamese hell by prattling something about the Communist threat to the United States and about that moronic 'Domino Theory.'"

I felt I had to say something. "You know, you make Attila, Hitler, or Stalin look like amateurs compared with Clark or Albright."

The cold blue eyes narrowed and the icy smile disappeared from the thin lips.

"OK, Stalin was a monster. And Clark is not Attila either, at least not yet. I will grant you that. But neither Stalin nor Attila nor Hitler nor any other crazed military or political dictator has ever in the history of murder and mayhem had a \$300-billion budget to wage war. You know that our peacetime military budget is some 30 percent more than the combined military budget of the other eighteen NATO countries! With that kind of money, year in year out, we can soon intimidate or bomb to a pile of rubble any country in the world. Can you imagine what a fraction of this money could do for America's failing health system? Or for the environment? Or education? Or for such a sensible foreign policy program like the Fulbright Foundation?"

I nodded rather eagerly. In my situation I could not agree more.

"We are now apparently ready to build a super modern \$200-million dollar fighter plane. What country in the world can possibly try to tell us to be sensible? We are like a real-life Godzilla that has gone gaga. Well, in a decade we are scheduled to give the Pentagon over 3 trillion dollars. Money makes might, and might makes right. No one in the past could do what we can do with that kind of money and that kind of technology."

Roger stopped talking for a while. I recently read an editorial by Edward Said, who said that "America's status in the world today is at its lowest, that of a stupid bully capable of inflicting much more damage than any power in history." I wanted to say, though, that the American political system has a built-in system of checks and balances that would eventually prevent even the Pentagon Godzilla and its monster contractors like Lockheed Martin, Boeing, or Raytheon Hughes from taking over the country. But I would not argue with Roger and said nothing. In Norway, I learned that silence is also conversation. Roger took some time before he continued.

"You will never know what I mean because you have never killed a human being for a political idea. Neither the Viet Cong nor the Serbs nor any of the nations the US has bombed over the past fifty years has ever posed a threat to the sovereignty of United States, with the exception of the Japs, of course, who have paid a terrible price for their attack on Pearl

Harbor. And you don't know what it's like to see a child gutted by a bomb.

"So what's the point?" I said before I realized I did. "You want Clinton or Clark to kill first before they come to their senses? And you seem to forget that anti-American terrorism *is* a threat to our national interests."

Roger looked at me with his cold blue eyes, "Whatcha say Mr. Editor? They should lull first before they come to their senses? And why not? If they give orders to kill people and cause 'collateral damage,' then they should do some of the killing themselves. It's time to learn something about the real nature of war from the savages. Like the Apaches. We should go back to the Apache way of fighting. If we want to wage war, then the politicians and the generals must share in the lulling, just like the Apache chiefs did, like Mangas Coloradas or Victorio, always in the first line of attack. Our 'chiefs' must also see others die from the bullets they have fired in hand-to-hand combat, and wipe blood, gushing from ripped jugulars, off their knives and their faces. And they – the Clarlts, the Cohens, and the Albrights – must pick up mangled body parts from the road before our tanks and armored vehicles can neatly move on into the enemy's territory without that crunching sound of human bones being ground into the asphalt.

"As for anti-American terrorism, you should know better than that. You have a Ph.D. in American studies. You should know that anti-American terrorism, as bad as it is, is not the cause of many American military interventions; it is the effect of American military adventurism. And of the arrogant American corporate push for the control of foreign markets and eventually of the whole world. You know that contrary to what the media say the Europeans don't like us. You read letters to the editor in *The European* or *The International Herald Tribune*. You know that many Europeans despise us, but they are frightened. They think we are going crazy."

Again, I decided to say nothing. I remember a Polish colleague of mine who had told me a few weeks before that I didn't live in "a City upon a Hill," as our American historians and politicians would have us believe, but in "ciemnogród," a Dark City. I also recalled how I lost my college job because I had taught a course in secular humanism and tried to offer another one on the annihilation of the Chiricahua Apache by the US government, a case of ethnic cleansing as ugly as any other. A brush with the

power of the religious-corporate establishment in the USA was supposed to teach me the value of reticence and the security of silence. You just have to "kiss ass," my American friends keep telling me.

"And we cannot make anybody go to war," Roger continued. It has to be a voluntary thing. Like with the Apaches. You know, you have studied them. You know that Apache chiefs like Mangas Coloradas or medicine men like Geronimo had to convince other Apaches to join them on the warpath. You had to justify to the others why it is that they should risk dying in war and leaving their women and kids in grief. If you failed, any Apache could refuse to fight and no one had the power to force him to fight.

"Unlike us, the 'civilized' Christians. We order our kids to kill against their will, against their better judgment, and we have them fight the dirty, stupid wars we have invented. The only thing the war pigs care about is their economic interests. They wage their wars to make the world safe – not for democracy, which they despise – but for American corporations, which they represent. And if that becomes impossible, then all they care about is saving face. At this time, saving face is the only reason why NATO continues to bomb Serbia, because Clark and Clinton are enraged that Milosevic has made us look stupid by not going belly up after a couple days of bombing, as our great military planners thought he would. But ordinary people don't want to fight and die to save face, much less for Wal-Mart, McDonald's, Nike, or Intel. Ordinary people may have to fight and kill for food. Or in self-defense. Or out of vengeance for their slain relatives – all "Apache reasons" for killing. But what have the Serbs or the Vietnamese done to us to justify what we have done to them?"

Roger stopped for a moment. He and I ordered more brew when the slender legs and firm breasts swung, and I began to ponder pensively the allure of semi-pagan Nordic womanhood. Roger took another swig and I found to my sad satisfaction that his gaze also wandered off to the breasts and legs. Killing and copulating, I thought, our ultimate obsessions in the frenzy of living. Driven insane by the passion to fight and fuck, rape and murder. And make money, of course. What's left? I wonder. When is time for reason here? And who cares about "cornrnnon" sense, a silly misnomer for a lost cause?

"Dropping bombs from the air-conditioned cabin of a radar-evading F-117 flying for the pilot's safety at 30 thousand feet is not war," Roger

resumed his harangue. "It is high-tech cowardice and indiscriminate carnage. And planning high-tech wars in the cool offices of the Pentagon, the CIA, or the White House is unprecedented evil. It is the kind of evil no punk or Indian savage has ever been capable of doing. Or dreamed of."

He fell silent. And I knew it was my time to say something. But I persisted in my silence. I sensed Roger was not finished yet.

"You know," he said at last, "sometimes I wish that the vindictive god and the insane hell Christians believe in were true. Imagine how challenged God Jehovah would be when confronted with the task of meting out adequate punishment to guys like Dulles, Nixon, Clark, or Albright. I mean it is hard enough to sufficiently punish a child killer, isn't it? But what do you do with a person who is responsible for having killed half a million children? Or fifty-eight thousand men? If you fry in hell for billions of years for misinterpreting the Scriptures or for not accepting Jesus, then what greater punishment is left for the war pigs?"

"Well, clearly there isn't," I said. "They die unpunished. You know it, I know it. And before they die, they make a lot of money," I added, hoping to keep the conversation going.

But Roger's eyes became vacant, and our conversation stalled. I felt dizzy: Norwegian brew was stronger than I thought, and I must have downed more glasses than I could keep track of. Soon Roger stood up. "See you around, bud," he said and left.

I didn't feel good. It got dark, and I could see the first stars reflected in the Oslo bay. Suddenly I felt the chill of living helpless in a killing universe. An article by Michael Albert I had read some time before on the Internet brought on a vision of a train carrying corpses that would not rot. The train kept moving and there was no end in sight – just piles and piles of dead, mangled bodies of children, women, and men; 200 new corpses a minute, one new car every five minutes, day and night, without pause. CNN's silent pictures of exploding bombs in Serbia were flashing with deafening noise in my mind. On the verge of hysteria, I began to yearn for a good god to take care of the war pigs and some others. But then I realized with panic that the war pigs may know that there is no good god out there, either to warn or punish them, and that they can get away with what they are doing. In a godless universe, the war pigs are gods, and might is right. Christian might, in particular.

By now I had developed a splitting headache and when the slender legs and firm breasts came one more time, I missed my final chance and wearily said "Nei" to yet another tall glass of norsk øl. It was time to go. Perhaps tomorrow the bombs would stop falling, I thought, as I left the pub and began to walk slowly to the bus stop.